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ABSTRACT

The development of literacy is traced in this paper to promote the thesis that dependence on literacy education naturally leads to two competing cultures, one oral and one literate. Events in the development of the Greek alphabet are traced to advance the argument, and the differences between cultures dependent on Greek and non-Greek writing systems are presented as evidence of the conflicts that can result between the competing dynamics of oral and written communication. The paper stresses the idea that the capacity for acoustic communication has been programed into human genes, making oral communication a fact of evolutionary history, while alphabetic communication enjoys no such programing and is a learned faculty in the sense in which a language is not. The recent events in Iran, the problems associated with the Chinese symbol system, and the "mind set" created by Western civilization's dependence on written language are discussed to illustrate the tension that has developed and is developing between the modes of oral language and the modes of literacy. From this discussion comes the conclusion that in any modern society some kind of partnership must evolve between oral language and literacy and that this partnership should be accepted and accomodated. (RL)

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THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN: TWO COMPETING CULTURES

Eric A. Havelock

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THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN: TWO COMPETING CULTURES

The public schools of the United States have come under an increasing barrage of criticism for their failure to teach children to read and write. The degree of what is called functional illiteracy in this country is a matter of concern and also dispute but everyone agrees that it is high, especially among some minority groups, though not confined to them. In the eyes of most people who can read and write, illiteracy and non-literacy are matters to be viewed with alarm. Some who have studied the problem are not so sure. At least they would argue that radio, television, and the wide-spread use of the electronic recording of music, song, and speech have altered the context within which the skills of literacy should be evaluated. Arguments both sociological and psychological have been put forward to the effect that media technology has rendered the skills of reading and writing partially obsolete. Alternative forms of communication can now take their place, and this may even prove to be beneficial to us because it will set us free from the printed word, the use of which has programmed us to think and feel in a linear and a limited dimension.

What precise operation taught to children, or adults sometimes, do we define, in the United States, as literacy? Factually speaking, it is the skill required to decipher twenty-six small linear shapes, all different and drawn or printed on paper. Each has a name we memorize by rote in a given order, and we call the series an ABC. Deciphering them means that we link the visual experience of seeing them with corresponding sounds of our spoken tongue. We have learned the values of these sounds by learning the names given in the alphabet. Somehow we learn further to look at a combination of these shapes and latch on to a continuous set of corresponding

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sounds making up what we call a word. The same trigger mechanism, working not quite so swiftly but still very fast, latches on to a group of such words to form a sentence, a statement or command or question.

It sounds simple enough when so described, yet the more you think about what is involved, the more complicated it appears. The psychological adjustment by which we learn to link a letter that we see to a language that we hear is immense. Despite all the outpouring of research, experimental and theoretic, in the field of child psychology and the learning process, it is difficult to find any attempt to analyze what actually happens at that flash of a second when a sentence, as we say, is read and then understood (which incidentally are two quite different operations). One reason for this lack is simple: the theorists and experimenters are adults, who by definition have learned to think and to think conceptually. Guided by their own sophisticated habits, they have fastened their attention on the readiness of children to form what they call concepts and to think like they do, disregarding the possibility that concepts, for example of space or time or quantity or relationship, are not a child's business. The complexity and intricacy of the motor mechanisms which the child has to exercise in order to be able to read at all, before becoming acquainted with concepts expressed in the script, are ignored. Highly as one values the pioneering work of Jean Piaget, for example, one also has to observe how the bias of his studies of the child's learning process and its proper stages focuses upon the achieving of concepts.

From the standpoint of the evolutionary process, the history of the human animal requires us to recognize that oral language is fundamental to our species whereas reading and writing wear the appearance of a recent accident. It is a curious kind of cultural arrogance which presumes to identify human intelligence with literacy. [Our skulls achieved their

present cubic capacity through processes of natural selection extending over perhaps a million years. The brains inside them cannot be measurably different from those of our ancestors of say ten thousand years ago. If we are equipped to use language for communication, so were they. Such a capacity does not merely identify us as human beings, it is the foundation of all human cultures. These have existed as oral systems from prehistoric times. The age of script, which ushered in the successive stages of a growing literacy, is by comparison a mere moment in time.

Despite this indisputable fact, the opinion is widespread, and scholars no less than the laity share in it, that any kind of human civilization depends upon literacy for its development and support. Where precisely one might date the arrival of the civilized condition on this planet is not a matter that lends itself to precise definition. A stage of transition from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture has been theoretically proposed and then a superimposed society of towns and cities providing an urbanized life style. The latter is loosely identified with the rise of a civilization in the Nile Valley and a rather similar one, roughly contemporary, in the Euphrates-Tigris area and perhaps a third achieved in the valley of the Indus. Three thousand B.C. is often taken as an approximate convenient date around which to focus the appearance of these societies in their first urbanized form and it often loosely assumed that the act of writing had to be invented to make them possible. This does not seem to be true. In Egypt, for example, however ancient the use of the earliest hieroglyphic symbols may be, their original efficacy was narrowly limited . Barbara Tuchman, in a recent lecture on the role of the book in history, has published the view that the Egyptian Book of the Dead, for example, goes back to about 3600 B.C. At that date, no such book existed. China, again, is loosely credited with a writing system of

immemorial antiquity. The assertion that she employed one early enough to precede the Mediterranean systems cannot be substantiated. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia some actual texts of law, prayers, incantations, and the like can be traced back perhaps to 2000 B.C. but they are primitive stuff. One can say, I think not unfairly, that most writers of books today, if they refer to the past history of their own highly literate craft, find it difficult to resist a bias in favor of its supposedly great antiquity in order to confer central importance upon it. It is recognized as a necessary prop to any civilized and meaningful existence.]

The historical truth is patently otherwise. By the laws evolution has prescribed, our species, homo sapiens, as distinct from our primate ancestors, is definable as one which speaks a language but does not write it. When we men and women came to invent human society, we did it with spoken language not written. We perfected the necessary tools, domesticated the necessary animals for food and transport, bred the necessary seeds and plants for agriculture, built the first houses, villages and towns, without any benefit of writing whatever. A civilisation does not have to become literate to be a civilisation. One striking proof of this lies almost under our own noses, did we but pay attention to it. The empire of the Incas, centered in the area of modern Peru, before it was conquered by the Spaniards, had achieved an advanced culture without the benefit of any writing whatever. Not only was the machinery of government elaborately structured and bureaucratised, but the material technology was advanced.

> Without paper and a system of writing the architects and master-masons who designed and supervised the construction of public buildings and engineering works ... built clay models, employing in actual construction sliding scales, plumb bobs, and bronze and stone tools. Without wheeled vehicles for transport, the huge

> polygonal blocks for fortress, palace, temple and storehouse were implaced by ramp and rollers and were fitted with extraordinary precision ... One of the most remarkable evidences of engineering skill was an elaborate network of roads, which in many places still survives ... Messengers serving fifteen-day shifts relayed messages about every mile. Thus one hundred and fifty miles could be travelled daily, a distance that later took the Spanish colonial posts twelve to thirteen days to cover. In the manufacture of textiles, the Inca utilized almost every available kind of fiber and produced elaborate multicolored tapestries ...

And so forth.[3]

This look at the Incas suggests that we also take a look at a somewhat parallel case, that of the ancient Greeks. Archeology has uncovered the existence of an early civilization based on Mycenae and Pylos in the Peloponnese which reached its culmination in the second millenium B.C. The discovery of quantities of inscribed clay tablets in the ruins of mainland palaces has led many scholars to infer, overhastily as I think, that this culture could be classified as literate. The script has been deciphered as symbolizing an early form of Greek, and has been named Linear B. It is a clumsy and phonetically ambiguous system which could have been used only by bureaucrats concerned with ledger keeping and never mastered by the general public nor used to symbolize the vernacular effectively. Its usage, in any case, ended with the destruction of the Mycenean culture somewhere about the middle of the 12th century. No epigraphical evidence exists for its survival in Greece after that date. The Greek alphabet, on the other hand, parent of the one we use, is not epigraphically attested before the last half of the 8th century B.C. This means that for four hundred years, at least, ancient Greece between say 1100 and 700 B.C. was like the Inca nation of the 14th and 15th centuries A.D., not illiterate, a pejorative term describing a personal failure occurring in literate societies, but strictly speaking non-literate or pre-literate.

The early classical culture of the Greeks, like that of the Incas, therefore already existed before the invention of the alphabet took effect. Civilizations can be non-literate and yet possess their own specific forms of institution, art, and contrived language. In the case of the Greeks these forms made their appearance in the institution of the polis, that is, the political mechanism we call the city-state, in geometric art, in early temple architecture, and in the poetry preserved in the Homeric hexameter. These were all functioning when Greece was non-literate.

Without verbal communication, mankind would be reduced to building nests or living in burrows and eating what unaided nature might provide. Under pre-literate conditions, verbal communication uses the mouth and ear. The introduction of any habit of mimicking such communication in inscribed form is the beginning of a most drastic historical process which is also a psychological one. Responsibility for verbal communication is partially transferred from the ear to the eye and from the mouth to the hand. It occurred gradually in most early societies, so at least common sense would suggest, and the epigraphical evidence, ranging from the earliest picture writing through hieroglyphs and syllabaries to the alphabet, supports this suggestion. But gradual or not, the effect can be seen as a drastic organic adjustment of certain bodily mechanisms, almost, one might say, an organic dislocation.[4]

The Greeks who in non-literacy initiated a program of cultural development still envied by modern nations were also the people who invented the means of attaining complete literacy. They did this by the invention of the alphabet, itself a Greek word for a specifically Greek technology, and later cultures, the Renaissance, the European, the Russian, the American, while introducing a few modifications and altering the sound values of some

of the letters, has been unable to improve upon the principles of the invention or its original efficiency. Previous systems, to use a metaphor, had achieved a degree of companionate marriage between ear and eye. The Greek system made the union intimate and indissoluble requiring a more drastic adjustment between partners now compelled to mate with each other to a degree not achieved in any previous system. But while the capacity for acoustic communication has been programmed into our genes, a fact of our evolutionary history, alphabetic communication enjoys no such programming. It is a part of human cultural history but not biological history. It is a learned faculty in the sense in which a language is not. It is not uncommon to confuse a language with the script used for it, as though the script itself constituted the language. In the strict sense it does not and cannot. The confusion is not confined to popular writing, it is found equally among the learned.]

Habits of communication acquired through natural selection cannot lightly be superseded or even supplemented without some painful adjustments. It would, I think, be true to say that the so-called literate societies of today are societies of two competing cultures, the written and the non-written. They operate in a partnership between two competing dynamics of communication, and perhaps of thought processes in which language is employed in two rather different ways though we are normally not aware of this. The word orally pronounced is used not merely in casual conversation but in the management of most personal relations, especially within the family group. A parent does not normally give guidance to his children by book, unless the child be a John Stuart Mill, and if the guidance is so supplied, a psychological price may have to be paid. One cannot readily make love out of a book. I'm not even sure that it is normally very helpful to cook and eat food out of a book, though many do. In the larger social sphere, it is possible to

perceive alternative styles of verbal management by which politics and government are conducted. Those who voted for President Carter may have thought that they were getting a born-again Christian. What they got in fact on the available evidence was a man who liked to pore over documents, assemble reports, read figures in the polls and document his policies. His approach has been described, by a sympathetic columnist in the New York Times, as that of an "engineer, devising comprehensive programmes on this subject or that"[5]; a man, in fact, of highly literate habit has been overwhelmed by an opponent who represents and expresses what I may call the oralist tradition in our society, using one-liners and country-style aphorisms, an air of rude common sense, the expression of casual opinions, of folksy humor, the absence of structured, policy-type thinking, a preference for day-to-day improvisation. This is to view his leadership personally as a personal type or symbol of style, regardless of the fact that the form that the policies that his supporters of the far right have taken often smacks of the doctrinaire, the over-literate and therefore the over-literal. Any modern industrial society, I suggest, contains these two competing styles of communication and maybe styles of thinking. The simplistic oral, with some emotional feeling behind it, and the documented and conceptual, the former carrying an inherited bundle of attitudes formed instinctively, the latter conforming to the ways we have learned by learning to read.

It has recently been observed[6] that though we officially pride ourselves as a people on our pragmatism in politics, we are fond of committing ourselves to programs and policies which are excessively doctrinaire and offer us imaginary choices between absolute good and absolute evil according to the prejudices of the speaker, choices which in the real world do not exist. Russian communism is viewed alternatively as a mortal enemy or as a friend of mankind. Both views are built upon propositions which are absurd. Free

enterprise is the name we now give to a dogma which fails to represent pragmatic reality just as the socialist utopia offered by some reformists corresponds to no actual human situation. This habit of substituting a concept for experience, I suggest, has been encouraged by alphabetic literacy. To realize that we grow up as a species in exclusive reliance on direct oral communication geared to the actual circumstances of the day and hour may help us to disentangle ourselves from the over-abstract doctrines, the mental sets, so mathematical in their stringent logic, by which we try to guide our public policies and behavior.

A minor but perhaps amusing symptom of the way in which the over-literate mind-set works can be seen in the objections raised by linguistic purists to innovations in the spoken tongue, corruptions they would say brought on by the language of the street and the marketplace. A medium like the alphabet which makes the words of the language into visible things confers a kind of sacredness upon the visible image, upon the word as spelled. The British BBC has recently indulged in an exercise in self-criticism, inviting experts to comment on the use or misuse of English in broadcasting. I quote the reported opinions of what I may style the right-wing in this controversy:

> Those who ill-use our language steal our language from us. If we are to be able to express other than elementary ideas, we need to do so in a language which is rich, expressive, and refined. Nothing in human endeavor is ever made fine except by dedicated human attention and scrutiny, and it cannot be assumed that language is an exception.[7]

That, I submit, is a highly literate judgment which another expert on the same side of the argument even translated into a moral argument: "If someone today using the English language speaks badly, he should really feel that he is abusing Shakespeare, that he is abusing Milton, that he is repudiating the values which are implicit in the Canterbury Tales or Hamlet. It is a question of the morality of speech."

But the morality he is concerned with is not of speech but of readership. When we consider the history of the word as spoken as against the word as written, we confront the uncomfortable fact that, for instance, the admired romance tongues of modern Europe, French, Italian, and Spanish, admired for their written literature, developed out of illiterate Latin, badly spoken with slovenly pronunciation and inattention to the proper lengths of vowels or the proper placing of consonants. The same fate overtook English, as a less conservative expert on the same BBC program remarked in the same report.

"Just imagine how upset you would have been with the great vowel shift in the fifteenth century when words like rad turned into road or when we lost our grammatical genders at the end of the Anglo-Saxon Period. Language is bigger than all of us and it will proceed regardless of us."

By language he means that language spoken in oral communication. An interesting example of linguistic variation produced by oral habit is supplied by Black English, at least according to some examples cited in the New York Times[9]. This is the habit of omitting the verb to be as a copula between a subject and a predicate: "They de winner" for they are the winners, or again, "My mamma name Mary" for my mamma's name is Mary, or "He a think he sorta weird" for "he will think he is sort of weird." This linguistic habit of omitting the copula returns us to an oral idiom of classical Greek speech, the so-called nominal sentence, particularly evident in Homer, which expresses relationships between subject and predicate by appositional equivalents, which constitute the simplest form of oral statement.

The written language is therefore not necessarily an exact counterpart of the unwritten. The latter has historical credentials rooted in habits of communication formed in the daily converse within the family group long

before society acquired the habits of documented government. In a retrospective view of the sociological thinking of Talcott Parsons, Daniel Bell has said:

> Parsons once wrote that he wanted to replace the Marxian dichotomy between capitalism and socialism with the distinction between Gemeinschaft (the primary face-to-face community of home and family) and Gesellschaft (the impersonal bureaucratic society.) This was the quest in fact of almost all the sociological fathers ..[9]

As stated, this view does not address itself directly to differences in linguistic usage, spoken or written, but I think the linkage could be made, especially in the implications of the phrase "face-to-face community." You do not need to be face-to-face if you use writing.

If we look outside our own borders and consider many areas of the so-called Third World, which like ourselves has used writing for many centuries, the scene becomes more complicated and the choices no longer confined to a simple one between literacy and non-literacy. We discover that our alphabetic script is not the only one in use. For many scholars this is not a matter of great importance compared with the more obvious differences of the spoken tongues themselves, the problem of "learning a foreign language," as we say. But in any discussion of literacy, differences in script systems offer problems which are crucial. Any spoken tongue is theoretically capable of expansion to cope with the vocabulary and the syntax of modern industrial societies.

Yet is this equally true of any system of written script used to express the spoken tongue? There are two areas of the world to which this question is especially pertinent: modern China and the nations of Islam, whether Arabic or Persian. These likewise are two areas with which we Americans have recently had peculiar difficulties, in coming to terms with the way

in which their peoples think, in understanding their notions of political and moral behavior.

The only common factor linking the Chinese writing system with that of Islam is a negative one. Both are non-Greek, that is, non-alphabetic. The ancestry of the Chinese system is obscure; its application in recorded history has been elaborate. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that it is logographic, that is, a sign represents a whole word, not a phonetic component, and by combining signs into larger units or "characters," individual words can be hyphenated to convey a meaning which each by itself would not have. Since a sign represents a whole word and a character a combination of whole words and since the words of any language are theoretically (almost but not quite) infinite, it is clear that the Chinese system cannot meet the requirements of economy in the number of signs, a requirement which the alphabet does meet and readily so, by offering in our case only twenty-six. The net result is that the average Chinese, as opposed to the specialist, is limited in the number and variety of the statements he can read easily. If the aphorisms of Chairman Mao, with their restricted vocabulary and syntax, are acceptable to the Chinese masses as a guide to attitude and action, this is precisely because they are both easily read and orally memorisable.

The ancestry of the script we loosely term Arabic lies in that area of Mesopotamia which evolved the syllabaries used by the Babylonians and Assyrians and the short hand alphabet used by the Phoenicians. The Greeks borrowed from the latter in order to add those improvements crucial to the perfection of the alphabet we now use. The other systems used in the Near East originally avoided these improvements, and so trace their ancestry backward directly to the pre-Greek systems.

To describe and account for the technological difference between our system and these others would involve an excursus too lengthy for the present paper. What has to be said, however, is that neither Chinese nor Arabic provide that practical efficiency in the attainment of literacy which we take for granted, and it is likely that in both these non-alphabetic areas of the world literacy in our sense will not be achieved until the principles of the Greek system, meaning our own, have been substituted for those at present employed.

The superiority of our Greek system as an instrument of literacy is measurable by three factors: the system has to be of a kind that is teachable to small children. Literacy is produced when:

> a system of instruction is devised to impose the habit of recognition upon the brain before it has fully concluded its growth; that is, in its developmental stage before puberty. More precisely, the habit must be formed in that period when the brain is still engaged in the task of acquiring the oral language code for which it is biologically equipped. It would appear that the two codes necessary for speaking and for reading have to meld together at a time when mental resources are still in a plastic condition--to use a loosely conceived but convenient image--so that the act of reading is converted into an unconscious reflex. In short, a population is rendered literate when an educational apparatus can be brought into being which is able to teach reading to very young children before they have been introduced to other skills.[10]

In the second place, whatever method of instruction is used, the system when read by the eye should be capable of triggering instant memory of the linguistic sounds which are symbolized by the system and it should be capable of registering any kind of sound that is available. Reading becomes an automatic reflex because the system leaves no doubt or choice as to what particular linguistic noise is to be triggered. The instrument furnishes a mechanism of recognition which is both unambiguous and rapid. Thirdly, as this occurs, the written symbols themselves, the letters and written words, cease to be a sacred mystery which only a few can interpret

and become commonplace and vulgarized. No need for an adult who has learned the system in childhood to consult a scribe or wise man to know what any given piece of script may say or mean.

The experience of mankind in the 2600 years since the Greek alphabet was invented demonstrates that only this particular Greek system adequately fulfills these requirements and that it therefore meets a fourth requirement, namely that a majority of any given population can completely master it. It is this majority and complete mastery that we have become accustomed to call literacy.

In this connection it should be noted that the Greek system persists today in three varieties: in its original shape as used by modern Greeks, in its Roman variety as used by the rest of the literate world, both in Europe and the Americas except Russia, and in its Cyrillic variety used by the Russians and some other Slavic populations. The basic principle of all three varieties which enables them to perform with the efficiency I have described has remained unchanged since the time of the original invention. Parenthetically, in this context, it is improper to view the Russian society as non-Western or backward. Despite widespread illiteracy in the past, Russia has, since its Christianization, enjoyed the same alphabetic advantage in written communication available to Western Europe. The mention of previous Russian illiteracy reminds one to add the caution that while the Greek invention makes theoretically possible the full socialization of literacy, any given society, for a variety of political and economic reasons, may decide to make the skill available to a minority of the population. The potential is there but only politics decides how it is used. Scholars and historians often apply the term literate to societies where any writing system is employed on any scale, however limited. I am deliberately restricting the term to describe the full realized potential of one and only one system of writing, namely the Greek.

This may seem dogmatic, but I think it is necessary to accept the restriction in order to understand some of the differences, political and psychological and moral, which separate us from the cultures with which we have to deal, whether in foreign policy or in cultural contacts. If one reviews our record in dealing during the last thirty years with what is going on in the Islamic countries on the one hand, or China on the other, I do not think we have reason to be proud of ourselves. A few observations on the relation of these two very different cultures to the scripts they employ for written communication may throw a little light on some dark corners in our own understanding.

That a gulf of misunderstanding may develop between a literate and powerful culture and non-literate culture, the former being armed with the power and the means of written communication, the latter still committed to oral ways of thinking and speaking, and that the gulf can become dangerous, was illustrated more than a century ago in the dealings between the British in India and their Indian troops which led to the Indian mutiny. Let me draw on one or two passages from a recent exhaustive account of this event which quotes eye-witness reports:

> All the Sepoys' fears, suspicions and grievances might even so have been overcome had there remained the same sympathy and understanding between them and their officers as had existed in the earlier years of the century and in the century before. Sita Ram Pand recalled: "In those days the sahibs could speak our language much better than they do now and they mixed more with us. Although officers today have to pass the language examination and have to read books, they do not understand our language ..."[11]

One observes here the reference to the overlord as a reader of books: the implication is that this increases the gap of comprehension between two languages.

> Mutinies in the army were not uncommon, though, nor were they considered by Indians the fearful crime which they were thought to be by Englishmen. The word used in Hindustani, ghadr, does not convey the meaning that mutiny conveys to English ears. It has no more pejorative sense than faithlessness or ingratitude. So long as the colonel was the father and mother of his regiment and had the power to deal with most grievances, this was what mutiny was--but as the colonel's power diminished, as the decisions which mattered to the Sepoy were more and more taken by distant people whom he had never seen, the word came less and less to represent what the Sepoy felt he was doing. Even if his officers listened, no one at headquarters seemed to take much notice ...[12]

The writer, himself a literate, betrays his own literate value system when he assumes that the word mutiny is more pejorative than "faithlessness" or "ingratitude." The latter are terms of familial contact in face-to-face speech and felt deeply by their users to be pejorative in an oral context. The former term describes a relationship to a system. I think also that when it is said that "the word came less and less to represent what the Sepoy felt he was doing," the "word" here means the word framed in writing as a written decision made in Whitehall or some other bastion of literacy before being delivered orally on the spot.

The actual spark which set off the conflagration was a rumor, orally transmitted, and the more powerful for being so, that the army's cartridges were being greased with animal fat. The basic functional character of non-literate communication among the troops is seen in their reaction as described at Meerut on April 24, 1857.

"Informed by two Muslim naiks that these cartridges had been greased with both beef and pork fat, the men took a solemn oath to have nothing to do with them unless every other regiment agreed to handle them, the Muslims among them swearing on the Koran, the Hindus by the holy water of the Ganges."[13]

Do we not still hear in this description the actions of Iranian religious leaders swearing orally on the Koran to have nothing to do with the American

Satan? As also the puzzlement of a literate American negotiator, used to the precision of alphabetic usage, who thinks he hears a word which means "guarantee" but which the user intends in the sense of a mere "understanding."[14] The society, or perhaps I should say societies, within which the mutiny occurred, were not illiterate but craft-literate, a term I should briefly explain. The native script employed was akin to that in which classical Sanskrit is written, a script, that is, with the same ancestry as Arabic script, and suffering from the same limitations as compared with the alphabet. Varieties of spoken language in India are formidable to this day, but it would seem, judging from modern Indian practice, that written communication in any language can be fully efficient, that is fulfill the requirements I have described above, only as it becomes alphabetized. It is this phonetic advantage of the script used which has indirectly assisted the adoption of the conqueror's tongue as the language of the present government in India because English is habitually written in the alphabet. In proportion as alternative scripts become less efficient, they become more difficult to master on a mass scale and also, lending themselves as they do to a greater degree of ambiguity, their management becomes an act of decipherment. Their idioms, therefore, embrace the traditional; their content avoids indulging in the novelty of fresh invention; and their usage requires the service of scribes and interpreters, a literate elite serving an orally minded population. The word as written acquires a semi-sacred and almost cabalistic status. A memoir of a participant in events surrounding the mutiny at Delhi recalls an incident in a room of a guard house near the river where "a native, from his appearance a soldier, was haranguing the men and saying that every power or government existed its allotted time and that it was nothing extraordinary that that of the English had come to an end according to what had been predicted in their native books. Before

I could make a prisoner of him, the men of the two companies, with a tremendous shout, took up their arms and ran off to the city."[15] The books in question are being quoted but not read. They exist as a background authority, prophetic and faithful, of what is to happen in the world. When panic set in at Cawnpore, the European population and their adherents crowded into the barracks for protection. Again, in the words of a contemporary we read: "People of all kinds, of every color, sect, and profession were crowding into the barracks ... buggies, palki-gharees, vehicles of all sorts, drove up and discharged cargoes of writer, tradesmen and a miscellaneous mob, all in terror of the imaginary foe."[16] The mention of writers among the crowd, classified as such, testifies to their presence in the society as members of an identifiable guild, of professional scribes at the service of an illiterate population.

These and passages of similar import can be culled from those who have written books on the Near and Far East but they occur incidentally and rarely. The authors, for the most part, direct their attention to other matters than the script used for documentation of communication. Desmond Stewart's life of T.E. Lawrence, recording events of a later epoch in another part of the world, describes among other things the tortuous negotiations between the high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and the sherif of Mecca, which had the object of offering inducements and promises to the Arabs from the British which would have the effect of provoking them to revolt against the Turks. What was and was not promised became matters of dispute after the First World War and have left problems which have haunted the United States no less than Great Britain ever since.

"McMahon communicated in needless haste and in terms which exceeded his mandate from the foreign office; his letters, the flowery yet sloppy compositions of a Persian scribe, used key terms in imprecise and changing

senses. Hussein had been equally elastic in his replies. Both sides used rhetoric more appropriate to the sale of a carpet than the disposition of inhabited countries."[17]

The author adds that McMahon's letter on October 24, 1915 was examined "like some ancient text to see whether it did or did not envisage Palestine as part of the area inside which Arabs would enjoy independence."

This critique comes from the mind of a writer schooled in the precision of communication afforded by the alphabet. He is describing the management of a communication written in Arabic script and committed to all the ambiguities, double meanings, obscurities, changes and manipulations of syntax which are inherent in the use of the script. The problem was only partially one of diversity between two spoken tongues. McMahon and the sherif never met face to face with an oral interpreter on the spot to mediate between them as one has to do in direct oral communication. Need we remind ourselves that as I write these words, January 1980, the New York Times reports similar difficulties of understanding in our American dealings with Iran over the United States hostages. The intermediary has to be Algeria. Why? Not merely because the Algerians speak French, which some of our diplomats can understand when they cannot understand Persian, but because as French speakers they have become used to the precise statements possible in the European alphabet used for French. It is inherent in communication conducted at the oral level that it partakes of the nature of a bargaining process, rather than consisting of a series of statements of principle and fact. The understanding of words and sentences therefore becomes flexible as the relationship between the parties subtly alters during the process of negotiation.

Lawrence, it is interesting to note, wrote of himself after the war was over as "the sole person who knew what had happened in Arabia during

the war and the only literate person in the Arab army.[18] His biographer, remarking on Lawrence's minimal knowledge of Arabic, observes that Lawrence himself

> was to make contradictory claims as to his knowledge of a language whose intrinsic difficulty for the non-Arab is increased by the gap between the spoken language, which differs from region to region, and that used for letter writing or public speech. To one biographer he put his vocabulary at its fullest at around 12,000 words, to another as at around 5,000. He assured both men that he never spoke grammatically and never learned to read or write the Arabic letters. Although he possessed at this time a Koran and a copy of one of the classical odes as well as an Arabic prayer book of 1145 A.D., small but very well written, he never read an entire Arabic text and knew Arabic literature only through books about it.[19]

The Arabic writing system, in short, failing in its proper task as an automatic register of the acoustics of the spoken tongue, takes off on its own in order to memorialize statements of a hieratic or elitist character.

The lack of an automatic correspondence, easily recognizable, between the written script and the sounds of the spoken vernacular, is a disability possessed by all scripts used in the past or the present in the Near East, alike in the days of Nebuchadnezzar as in those of Ayatollah Khomeini. It has always had the result of favoring a limitation in the content of what is written to statements of what is ritualistic and familiar and traditional. As one recent newspaper correspondent has written of Persian, as used under the Ayatollah's government, "it is a prayer language." What is written is a kind of holy writ, sacred, or at least using the idioms of the sacred. We should beware of the notion that in craft-literate cultures, what is written partakes of the full idiom and flexibility of the orally spoken language.

A parallel result of this limitation is that, in using the script, attention tends to focus on the mere shapes of the symbols employed

regardless of what they are supposed to say. The notion arises that writing is magical and that what is written is cabalistic in meaning, visually valuable as an art object in itself.

Some two years ago, an exhibition entitled "Calligraphy in the Arts of the Ancient World" was put on at Asia House Gallery in New York. The art critic (John Russell) of the New York Times, who described it, entitled his article "To Write Was To Worship." It was an apt headline. Since, however, worship is only one department of a normal human life and occupies its reserved place in a day otherwise devoted to the business of living, the definition of writing as an act of worship inevitably betrays the fact that writing plays an equally limited role in the daily life of the people and that its content is specialized. The full register of what goes on in communication exists only in the ephemeral accents of orally pronounced speech. The critic, in fact, fell into the common confusion which supposes that because in certain cultures the written symbols are highly valued, artistically embellished and elaborated as a form of decoration, their presence signifies a vigorous exercise of literate communication and a high value placed on what we call literacy. It is only as the symbols become devalued to the status of mere messengers of linguistic sound that literacy becomes both possible and valued. It is symptomatic of the affinity of Islamic calligraphy for Chinese that it penetrated into China and was there highly valued by a culture equally calligraphic in its writing habits. Both cultures were and are craft-literate. It is also symptomatic of the tenuous relationship between Arabic script and actual language that the exhibition included a Limoges plaque of Mary Magdalen, that is, of a Christian work "which has around its border the name of Allah written over and over again and with no regard whatever for the true meaning." This

is what happens in calligraphy; the speech function of the symbols is forgotten as the decorative values of the written shapes are exploited.

The British have had the enterprise to undertake a translation of the Koran into English. Appropriately enough, it is described in an account given by the London Guardian [20] as a "recording", not a printed text. The cassette instructs the user that it should not be played in a frivolous atmosphere. It has been listened to by the imam of Wembley Mosque and received his approval in the words "I have listened to the present recording of the holy Koran as carefully as I possibly could three times over. If despite my careful checking, an error or omission has escaped my attention, I seek forgiveness of Allah." If we are inclined to smile at such meticulousness, we should also realize that our own relative indifference to the way a thing may be said, provided we keep the same "meaning," as we say, is derived from the fact that our own script, in the arrangement of its symbols, carries no such visible and worshipful protection as does the acoustically dubious and difficult script of Islam.

Let us return to those prototypes of literacy, the Greeks of antiquity and consider them as they were before the invention arrived and as they largely remained for a long time after it did arrive. Admitting the degree of their civilized achievement in the non-literate period, before the recorded classical age begins, did they rely purely on casual conversation to maintain their identity as a people and their ethos as a culture? Structures of law and custom covering property and family and civic government, the traditions of religion and belief and history, and the technologies prescribed by science are in our case handed on and learned easily because they are available in documented form. They can be read, and the text, whatever it is, is there in the background as a reference

or guide or court of appeal. But what is the transmission system in a culture which has no documentation? As I have argued elsewhere and need not repeat at length here, the tradition has to be preserved and transmitted and made effective and reused in an oral culture by the use of memorized speech. There is no other way. To be memorisable, speech has to be rhythmic. A culture of oral communication is a poetic culture. Its traditions and its rules of government, its beliefs and rituals and much of its behavior, the etiquette of the culture, are enshrined in epic verse, framed and recited by oral experts but also present in varying degree upon the lips of the people. Nor is the rhythmic word alone sufficient. It is aided by the prompting of music and dance. Oral recitation becomes a song or a chant, often accompanied by formal gestures, and dance measures chorically performed. The preservation of the verbal tradition is a communal activity, the audience must share with the performers the experience of repeating the treasured word.

Such was the cultural function of the Homeric poems. Their content on analysis yields a compendium of hoarded wisdom, recommended behavior patterns for warriors and voyagers, for peace and war, for civic government and military operations, for agriculture, for domestic relations between men and women and children, a kind of mirror image of what it meant to be a citizen of the early Greek city-states. I have sought to demonstrate the truth of this view of Homer elsewhere and again need not now repeat myself.

We can be sure that that was how the Incas became and remained civilized without benefit of script. All culture, confronted by the literate invader, whether in South America 500 years ago or in modern colonial Africa, is a frail plant which is quickly deprived of nourishment and dies. Snatches of epics and songs of the musicians of the people may

be recorded by the literate technology of an invader but not always and never completely. The Spanish Conquistadors, forcing their Indian subjects to the acceptance of Christianity, the Christianity of a literate present, communicated by holy books, wiped out the very remains of the ancestral poetry, music and dance with few exceptions. It is of ironic interest that even the Spanish chroniclers who left some record of what the Spanish invaders found and heard were themselves often poets using rhythmic verse for purposes of history: "They would freely change the data to maintain the meter of their verse."[21] This is a warning of the slipperiness and the limited reliability of orally preserved record whether of ancient Greece or other cultures, and whether pre-literate or craft-literate.]

However distant the Homeric poems in time and however faint the record of the oral art of the Inca, the Aztec, and the Maya, their analogue still persists and lives on in the craft-literate societies of Islam to this day, never more so than in this year of defiance of literate America by oral Iran. A newspaper correspondent[22], referring to the initiation of the most holy day of the Shiite Moslem year, describes it as a period of mourning, self-flagellation, processions and epic poems extolling martyrdom. These, so the reporter observed, might "inflame the situation in Iran;" that is, the rhythmic verse as performed not only communicates given actions but recommends them. Tales of martyrdom are presented in a verbal form "called a marthiyi ... described as "an elegy, a dirge in verse celebrating Hussein's cruel death and extolling his courage in the face of death. The marthiyi, accompanied by physical scourging, have traditionally produced high emotion as sundown descends in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries with Shiite communities. Doctor Rahman, who is not of the Shiite movement, said that many of the marthiyi are

emotional and inflammatory poetry, some of it lies."

The same reliance on verbal rhythm has been evident in the Baghdad radio during the war between Iraq and Iran. News programming is accompanied by patriotic poetry and songs, replacing the prose commentary that Western news media would supply. The words, I suggest, are sung in order to be repeated on the lips of the watching audience. During the period of competition between the government of the Prime Minister Bakhtiar, the Shah's representative (the Shah having left) and the rising revolutionary movement in Iran, the New York Times reporter observed [23] that "this is a culture geared not to prose but to poetry". The Pahlavi dynasty committed to French and to the Western alphabet used by the French tongue and to the emancipation offered by alphabetic communication and Western books written in the alphabet had the effect, whether intentional or not of destroying previous discourse. "The Muses," opined the Times correspondent, "clearly identify with Khomeini," who in a public statement, recalling the ethics of Iranian oral fundamentalism, described a Jewish petitioner, obviously not an inhabitant of a modern literate Israel, receiving justice in answer to his plea before Moslem elders in an oral court of judgment. [24]

The Iranian revolution, then, so embarrassing in its consequences for the West, can be partially understood as a revolt of orality against literacy, on the part of a tradition that is oral, against a "modern mind-set," as I have called it, which in Iran has not itself gained traditional status, because it depends on an unfamiliar if more efficient writing system. It is partly a collision between poetry and prose, between the language a poetic culture uses, which is simple and very personal and imagistic and pictorial, and the language of alphabetic literacy, which is more abstract, legalistic, tight-drawn and conceptual. The Kurds, even more non-literate than the Iranians, and conducting their own rebellion against them, are

are reputed as fighting for the preservation of their own music. It takes some historical imagination to realise that a music might be worth fighting for. Certainly it would not occur to us that it was.

On the other side of the world China is now conducting a movement in the reverse direction. The so-called cultural revolution, now abandoned, was at the time widely and correctly viewed as a revolt against modernisation, the expression of a wish to return to the simpler ways and more understandable values of village life with its handicrafts, frugality, home-grown food. The change backwards was directed by an elite, and indeed imposed by it, creating a backlash of resentment which by a more recent turn of the wheel has prompted a public trial of the so-called Gang of Four for dictating such a change and disrupting so many lives to accomplish it. It is impossible to think of a similar attempt at reversion in Western society. It could never have a similar traditional appeal, strong enough to be temporarily successful. The reason for the difference, I suggest, lies in the nature of China's traditional means of writing. Here indeed is a historical example which might justify Marshall McLuhan's aphorism: the medium is the message. Because of its enormously cumbrous character, to which I have already alluded, the use of Chinese script at any advanced level of written communication has necessarily and traditionally been confined to a small elite whose training in the management of it can take years--indeed a lifetime. What a contrast to that automatic reflex mastered by a child of seven or eight in alphabetic cultures. By its very nature the Chinese system as its characters multiply tends to enshrine a record of standardised themes, admonitions, practices, complicated but unvarying, which form an intellectual strait jacket. The Gang of Four must have derived their confidence from this tradition of elitist management, which had predated the theories of modern communism by hundreds of years. Communication of

orders issued by the elite to the general populace, on the other hand, was managed by oral mechanisms, as was also true of communication of the populace with itself. The sayings of Chairman Mao took the traditional oral form of aphorisms to be memorised, not read except in the handbooks provided to the faithful, and even if read, their vocabulary was carefully restricted. Another mechanism of communication was and still is the wall poster, a means of making simple statements and offering directions, commands, prohibitions, communicated by direct pictorial vision, supplemented by a few of the simpler written characters, like a child's comic strip.

However, a radical change is perceptible, looming on the horizon. Ever since the communist revolution of the late forties, the proposal has been put forward that the antique ancestral script be replaced by the phonetic Greek (or as I prefer to say) or "Roman" alphabet. The proposal has been fiercely resisted, and still will be, partly because China does not enjoy a common dialect, and the characters at present in use can cross linguistic boundaries. Likewise the loyalty to the visual values of calligraphy felt in Islamic countries also operates in China, to conserve the characters as a form of art rather than verbal communication. A dispatch [25] in the New York Times describes how the Chinese international wire service "will use the phonetic Roman that has been officially adopted in China as an aid in rendering Chinese characters." This decision, as it happens, has been accompanied by a recent change in the alphabetic spelling of Chinese names with which newspaper readers are becoming familiar. But changes in spelling conventions are a minor matter compared with the original breakaway from character writing to phonetic script, a step which one day will bring China into the modern world. As the same dispatch reports, "The (spelling) reform is part of an effort, begun after the Communists came to power in 1949, to make the Chinese language

easier to read and write. That, in turn, it is said, would increase literacy and speed up communication ... The overall reform has involved ... the adoption of the Roman alphabet in addition to and ultimately perhaps replacing the traditional characters." It should be added that in the meantime a compromise is being attempted which proposes a simplified version of the traditional system consisting of 2000 characters. But even this figure, limited as it seems by Chinese standards, shows how compromise is impossible. How can even 2000 different characters compete in economy and speed of recognition with 26 letters of the alphabet? How can any child of seven attain mastery of such a system? Knowledge, a reading knowledge, of the traditional Chinese classics, depends upon the use of a multiple of 2000. This literature in its original form, I predict, is doomed to become a collector's item, condemned to obsolescence in fact. It can survive and be influential only in alphabetic transcription and translation. A new kind of Chinese literature will inevitably arise, the child of that Greek invention of 2700 years ago.

I have spent a good part of this address upon our problems of communication with other countries. Let me conclude by returning to one or two aspects of problems surrounding the ways we communicate in the U.S. among ourselves. The radical movements of the sixties were viewed at the time in the U.S. as prompted by the Vietnam War. They were seen also as a symptom of a generation gap between young and old. Neither of these explanations goes to the root of the matter. The uprisings, if that is not too strong a word, occurred also in Canada, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, none of which were involved in Vietnam. The protest, moreover, although it took some political forms, was not essentially political in nature; it did not offer a programme of social or political action by either the political right or the political left. As was sometimes remarked at

the time, it was against institutions of all sorts, without, however, espousing anarchism or syndicalism on the earlier European model. It was in fact profoundly anti-theoretical. It did, however, exhibit one characteristic in all countries where it occurred. It was musical, in the broadest sense of the term. It found its most expressive form in folk music, country music, rock and roll and rock, performed not simply before audiences but inviting the audiences' physical and emotional participation. At the academic level, the same symptom appeared in the form of the teach-in. One can call the entire movement a mass revival of oralism, a revival of habits partially disused as the values of literacy have taken hold of our society, and also a resurrection of layers of our consciousness long buried. The songs of the Beatles are still with us, and are likely to retain a permanent place in our cultural landscape, thanks to electronic recording.

Symptoms of this revival of oral culture may be said to have made their first appearance 60 years ago after the first world war, in what became known as the jazz age. The involvement of the singer with his audience, the band with the dancer, is crucial to what becomes a direct act of communication. It comes easiest between young persons and can be shared by their elders, but as one gets older, it becomes harder to sympathise. Especially is this true of highly literate persons with disciplined intellects, for the oral modes of communication employed are unstructured, intimate and close, at the moment of utterance, but not lasting in their effects.

I detect in short a tension, latent but perhaps growing in our society, between the modes of oralism and the modes of literacy: the one inherited, instinctual, formed by a million years of history, the other recent, painfully acquired, programmed, and somewhat brittle; something, however, you have to

learn if you are to get on in the world. I think the tension can be perceived in antiquity, where it all began, in Greece during the fifth century before Christ, when Athens was becoming literate. I think the potential for it has been latent in European societies ever since, in varying degree according to the degree of literacy achieved. The long rule of the Catholic Church over the Catholic peoples could be compared to that of the Chinese elite over the Chinese masses. Both controlled a virtual monopoly of the word as written and as read, treated hieratically as a repository of secret truths, expressed in the Latin tongue. The reformation established itself on the requirement that the Bible be read in churches in the vernacular, a step half way towards the establishment of schools of letters for the majority. Our own founding fathers, Protestants or free thinkers, established a constitution which could enjoy stability and permanence because the populace could read it.

It is, therefore, no part of my thesis that the oral situation of society should be idealised: there is nothing intrinsically healthy about replacing literacy by its opposite, or downgrading the ability to read and the need to teach it. The gift of the Greek alphabet has been precious beyond estimate. Rather, it is to be realised that in any modern society some kind of partnership takes place between the oralism and literacy and that this partnership should be accepted and accommodated. The literate mind is more conceptual, generally speaking, than the preliterate, more abstract. The practice of reading--which in this respect is more important in its effects than writing--is not just one particular skill among many. It is also a state of mind, or produces a state of mind, which can become antagonistic--though not necessarily so--to a pattern of impulses, emotions, and attitudes which operate at a lower level of our consciousness and have

learned to express themselves most effectively in oral communication. Some psychological harmony between them has to be sought. It would be easier to find if we shifted some of the emphasis in the primary schools back from reading and spelling and writing towards elocution, recitation, song and dance, and particularly the memorisation at the primary level of verse and poetry. Probably we should all be introduced to reading what we have first been taught to memorise and recite orally.

There may be other types of accommodation required in our society between the hearer and the reader, the speaker and the writer. What these may be I leave to my audience to consider. I myself have no quick answers.

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